

The Ninety-third Division - Black US soldiers' struggles in World War II - Nelson Peery

Extracts from Nelson Peery's *Black Fire - The Making Of A Black Revolutionary*. Peery describes here the racism and segregation encountered by black soldiers and their militancy in opposing it during WWII.

Despite the sympathy for Communist Party politics and for Stalin's USSR that he occasionally expresses, Peery's book is an excellent account of his childhood (some of it spent as part of the only black family in a rural all-white Minnesota town), his youth in the Depression years, as well as his experience of the conditions of black soldiers and the army struggles he was involved in. The later part of the book describes his covert involvement, towards the end of his army service at the end of the war, with the Phillipine leftist guerrilla movement.

Black Fire - The Making Of A Black Revolutionary, Nelson Peery, Payback Press, Edinburgh, UK, 1995.



FORT HUACHUCA is in the high desert of Arizona. The valley and its surrounding chain of mountains form a lovely jewel in the beauty of the Southwest. In the evening, the sun bathes the ragged mountains in a reddish afterglow. The sage takes a soft purple hue. The winds rise to moan through Montezuma Pass and spread their melancholy across the desert floor. A word of the Apache Indian, Huachuca means "Mountains of the Wind."



The military never dreamed of using the black soldiers as anything but hewers of wood and drawers of water. They sent them into the Quartermaster, Port, Water Supply, Graves Registration, Laundry, and Engineer Battalions. These combat support groups freed up white men to fight a white man's war in defense of a white man's country.

The black press matured as a fighting organ within the Abolitionist movement. It led the fight to force the government to accept the slaves and black freemen as combat soldiers. Its tactic was to buy first-class citizenship with the blood of the Negro soldier. The black press thought that institutionalizing the black soldier as a laborer a second-class soldier would strengthen second-class status after the war. The tactic of sacrifice failed in the Revolutionary War, in the War of 1812 and in the Civil War, in the wars against the Indian, in the war against Spain, and in the war against Germany. The consistent failure of this tactic was no deterrent.

The black masses were of a different opinion. Poll takers in Harlem found that most blacks believed they would be treated better by the Japanese than by the whites. They believed they should force concessions rather than make the sacrifice. Mrs. Roosevelt tacitly supported them, saying, "The U.S. cannot expect the loyalty of the Negroes under present conditions."

**The Ninety-third Division - Black US
soldiers' struggles in World War II - Nelson**

Peery

Extracts from Nelson Peery's *Black Fire - The Making Of A Black Revolutionary*. Peery describes here the racism and segregation encountered by black soldiers and their militancy in opposing it during WWII.

Despite the sympathy for Communist Party politics and for Stalin's USSR that he occasionally expresses, Peery's book is an excellent account of his childhood (some of it spent as part of the only black family in a rural all-white Minnesota town), his youth in the Depression years, as well as his experience of the conditions of black soldiers and the army struggles he was involved in. The later part of the book describes his covert involvement, towards the end of his army service at the end of the war, with the Phillipine leftist guerilla movement.

Black Fire - The Making Of A Black Revolutionary; Nelson Peery, Payback Press, Edinburgh, UK, 1995.

====*=====

FORT HUACHUCA is in the high desert of Arizona. The valley and its surrounding chain of mountains form a lovely jewel in the beauty of the Southwest. In the evening, the sun bathes the ragged mountains in a reddish afterglow. The sage takes a soft purple hue. The winds rise to moan through Montezuma Pass and spread their melancholy across the desert floor. A word of the Apache Indian, Huachuca means "Mountains of the Wind."

*

The military never dreamed of using the black soldiers as anything but hewers of wood and drawers of water. They sent them into the Quartermaster, Port, Water Supply, Graves Registration, Laundry, and Engineer Battalions. These combat support groups freed up white men to fight a white man's war in defense of a white man's country.

The black press matured as a fighting organ within the Abolitionist movement. It led the fight to force the government to accept the slaves and black freemen as combat soldiers. Its tactic was to buy first-class citizenship with the blood of the

Negro soldier. The black press thought that institutionalizing the black soldier as a laborer a second-class soldier-would strengthen second-class status after the war. The tactic of sacrifice failed in the Revolutionary War, in the War of 1812 and in the Civil War, in the wars against the Indian, in the war against Spain, and in the war against Germany. The consistent failure of this tactic was no deterrent.

The black masses were of a different opinion. Poll takers in Harlem found that most blacks believed they would be treated better by the Japanese than by the whites. They believed they should force concessions rather than make the sacrifice. Mrs. Roosevelt tacitly supported them, saying, "The U.S. cannot expect the loyalty of the Negroes under present conditions."

A movement is led by a press. Without its own press, the militant movement of the blacks fell under the influence of those who had a press. That press, controlled by the ambitious black upper class, was little more than a safety valve for the militancy of the masses.

As they regained control of the movement, the bourgeois owners of the black press began a national clamor for an integrated army. The generals wouldn't even consider it. They disregarded the fact that blacks, whites, Chinese, and Filipinos were fighting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, in an integrated army on Bataan.

During World War I, the white population had angrily asked why black men were not dying at the rate of whites. Now they were questioning why blacks weren't being drafted at the rate of whites.

*

The generals had nothing to draft them into. Whites were drafted by number and blacks were drafted by quota. Although they were 10 percent of the population, their quota was 6 percent of the army. All the black organizations were up to strength. They could not create any more service units without creating more combat units. The answer, over the bitter complaints of the black press, was to form two segregated infantry divisions. This would allow them to draft blacks in proportion to whites. Giving in to both sides in a seemingly democratic gesture, they ordered the reconstitution of the old -Ninety-third Infantry Division (Provisional).

Black regular army units - the 9th and 10th Cavalry, the 24th and 25th Infantry, and an assortment of army reserve troops - provided the cadre sent to Fort

Huachuca. Half the regular army 25th Infantry: caught in Bataan by the Japanese invasion, was fighting there.

With the remainder of the 25th as its core, forming a new 369th, and federalizing the 8th Illinois National Guard as the 368th, they called the 93rd Division to the colors. Gen. C. P

Hall took command.

*

There was no end to the troop trains that pulled into Fort Huachuca in the spring of 1942.

Throughout the blistering heat of the days and the soft cool of the nights the trains puffed and wallowed into the sidings, disgorging the men and their baggage. Engines turned around and headed back for more.

They came from the plantations of the Black Belt, from the mines of the Virginias and Alabama and Pennsylvania, from the slums of New York and Chicago, from the hill towns of Kentucky and Tennessee. They came from the sea islands off the Carolinas and Georgia and from the assembly lines and relief lines of Detroit and from the blast furnaces of Cleveland and the open hearths of Gary and the open plains of Texas.

Some came with scars of shackles on their legs and the indelible mark of Parchman's Farm stamped into their eyes. They came with college degrees and parole papers. They came with pockets full of loaded dice and fingers supple from shuffling the deck. Some with jet-black skin and untamed eyes had tense mouths quick to state that they had no white blood in their veins and were descended pure from the Original Man.

Drafted, they came grumbling and cursing, dragged from wife and home. Some came as volunteers. They came damning America, her Jim Crow and her lynch law. They came cursing Hitler and the Fascists and eager to do battle for human rights.

Brothers separated for years met in the barracks, hugged and kissed and cried. One man, seeing a picture of his wife in another soldier's wallet, calmly picked up an ax handle and hit him in the face. Bitter enemies from rival policy houses

met as long lost friends. Men from

the peonage of Georgia and Alabama and South Carolina took bunks near one another and talked far into the night about coon hunting and fishing and the meanness of the white man.

Some turned their faces and took sips from little bottles. As night settled a few would slip away to The Hook, the whore town of tents and tin shacks outside the gate, and lie with one of the three-hundred women who serviced Fort Huachuca's thirtythousand lonesome, isolated soldiers.

[...]

* * *

[....]

The total segregation of the all-black fort shielded us from the violence that the black soldier faced everywhere, especially in the South. Enveloped by the "Mountains of the Wind,"

isolated in the vast wilderness of the high desert, we soldiers of Huachuca lived beyond the reach of sheriffs and night riders. Our relative safety only increased our anger and frustration as we received news of mistreatment of the black troops and civilians.

The black newspapers, in a minimal way, kept us informed. We infantrymen did not trust them. We knew that their strategy to gain equality for the black people (and leadership for themselves) was having the black soldier make greater sacrifices and show more patriotism than the whites. Before we were through basic training, they set up a howl to commit us to combat. We hated the black newspapers for their constant appeals to the government to send us into action.

The spontaneous transfer of information by the soldiers themselves was much more dramatic and reliable. Eighteen thousand threads of information daily entered the fort as letters from friends and relatives, from servicemen and local papers. The commanders, fully aware of the inevitable outcome, were incapable of stopping them. The rumor mill ground on day and night. The rumors were seldom as bad as the realities. America was telling us that just because we were going to have to fight and perhaps die for the country, we better remember our

place - in uniform or out.

*

As the weeks ground on, we found more and more to fight against, less and less to fight for.

The "B Squad" movement rose spontaneously in the rifle companies. When two men from the 369th met, one would shout, "What's your outfit, soldier?" and the other would answer,

"B Squad: Be here when they go over, and be here if they get back."

* * *

THE MORE THE government spoke of democratic war aims, the greater became the Fascist terror against the blacks. The cops in Alexandria, Louisiana, shot down twelve black soldiers. The sadistic lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, Missouri, was a carnival of horror. After the torture and burning was over, scores of cars filled with white men, women and children dragged the broken body of the black youth through his neighbourhood. They stopped a few times to challenge the blacks to fight. With their men bottled up in Fort Huachuca, there was no response from the women and children.

The sullen demoralization of the soldiers ripened toward violence. Army G-2 - military intelligence, something akin to a military FBI - fearing the explosion, warned the black newspapers that they would draft their personnel if they became inflammatory. If necessary they would (and on occasion they did) confiscate their papers. When the small local press, the *Southwest Georgian*, exposed a lynching in Newton, Georgia, in 1943, the editor was immediately drafted and his paper folded. Half the staff of the militant *California Eagle* was

drafted. Finally, the G-2 warned that although the seizure of individual issues of papers was permissible, banning the black press would "only serve to supply ammunition for agitation to colored papers." The issue of freedom of the press wasn't even involved. The black press's response was to militantly declare its patriotism.

Shaken by the low morale of the Negro people for the war, *Time* magazine ran a special edition exposing the wretched, segregated conditions of the Negro

soldier. Its aim was to force the government to do something about it. The Negro press attacked *Time*, stating that such information would make slackers out of the Negro soldier.

Most of us understood that Hitler was worse than Senator Bilbo or Rankin or Talmage or Thurmond. We understood that his concentration camps were worse than the chain gangs and prison farms. The historical base of our consciousness was firmer than this understanding.

The chain gang and lynch mob precede Hitler and would be here after he was gone. There was no room for illusions. Somewhere along the line we would have to fight it out here.

The battle began at Gurdon, Arkansas. The black Ninety-fourth Engineer Battalion from Fort Custer, Michigan, was on maneuvers. A few isolated fights between the troops and the police and MPs escalated to an attack by police and the town's mob against the unarmed soldiers.

Northern white officers were beaten and called "nigger lovers" while the MPs stood by. The unarmed black soldiers scattered into the woods. Some of them caught freight trains back to Michigan, where the Army court-martialed them for desertion. We began to secure and hide ammunition.

When the United States entered World War I, the economy was almost at full employment for white workers. The rapid expansion of war production created an immediate and severe labor shortage. The employers sent agents into the black labor reserve of the South. They pulled millions of sharecroppers and service workers into well-paying jobs in the factories at the very beginning of the war. That war had something in it for everyone.

World War II began during the Depression. Millions of unemployed white workers had preference in hiring. In the spring of 1942, blacks constituted fewer than 3 percent of the war workers. The labor shortage began late in the year. Then the doors opened a crack to the black workers. The head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph, organized the march on Washington to force a fair employment policy in the war against fascism. The government had no intention of giving in until Secretary of War Stimson, an open white supremacist, convinced Roosevelt that Randolph's real aim was to prevent the Communists from taking over the civil rights movement. Mark

Eldridge, appointed chair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), immediately went on a speaking tour that spring to assure whites they had nothing to fear from the FEPC. He received a standing ovation from a Southern white audience when he stated, "... not even all the mechanized armies of the earth, Allied and Axis ... could force the Southern white people to abandonment of the principle of social segregation."

By February 1942 the war was in full swing. The whites of Detroit rioted and attacked blacks moving into a federal housing project at the edge of "their" community. Thirty-five thousand white workers laid down their tools and walked out of the huge Douglas Aircraft plant when one black was hired. In the summer of 1942, poll takers in Harlem found that only 11 percent of the blacks believed they would be better off after the war.

The Marine Corps had never admitted blacks. The navy stopped accepting them between 1919 and 1930. In 1930 they accepted a few mess men. After World War I, the army had practically stopped recruiting blacks. Congress, under political pressure, developed a quota system and put a lid on the size of the army. The Negro-hating generals got around congressional intent. While keeping the names "infantry," "cavalry," and "artillery," most of the black combat outfits became labor and service organizations. On paper, each black combat soldier became two soldiers, one combat (on paper) and one labor (actually). The trick cut the black slots in half and assigned the other half to the recruitment of whites. The generals were then able to form a lilywhite Tank and Air Corps.

Self-appointed black leaders, and those appointed by the white political structure, appeared as if by magic. They began maneuvering to take control of the simmering movement of the working-class black. Forced to fight Hitler, the working-class black deeply believed the fight should start here and now. The army held the greatest concentration of blacks, and the Ninety-third was the pawn to be fought over.

*

The Ninety-third Division plus the post complement numbered close to twenty-five thousand men at Fort Huachuca. The commanders realized the danger of keeping that number of men bottled up in the desert without decent recreation and almost completely cut off from social contact with women. The United Service Organization (USO) never stopped at Huachuca.

The commanding generals trembled at the thought of white women dancing and singing before black troops. The USO directors didn't want it to happen, and we didn't expect it.

In June 1942 our pay went from twenty-one to fifty dollars a month. Suddenly we had money to spend and nothing to spend it on. The tension increased.

Fry, the tent and tar paper town near the gate to the fort, became the scene of unending fights as the soldiers turned more and more to the whores and the bootleg whiskey. A few rough bars with names like Yazoo City and Selma Beer Garden sprang up. They made matters worse.

We nicknamed Fry "The Hook." Anyone who went there was going to get caught by something - the clap, a knife blade, or, if he was lucky, a tough black fist. The army built a huge recreation center we called the Green Top. With its hundred-yard-long bar, it was to be an alternative to The Hook. The latest easy-riding blues jelly-rolled from the jukeboxes. Neat young black barmaids imported from Texas and Louisiana served five-cent beer. Everyone flirted with them, and though they were not allowed to dance with the soldiers, for three dollars they would slip away or make an after-hours date.

There was no directive against going to Tucson, Bisbee, or Nogales. Phoenix was off-limits.

The black 364th Infantry regiment, ordered to Phoenix from Hawaii, resisted the segregation and police brutality. A hundred of them took up arms and fought it out with the MPs and cops. They killed one officer, one white enlisted man, and a white civilian before being overwhelmed.

Getting out of the fort was almost impossible. As the tension neared the flash point, the decision was made to provide army trucks for transportation.

Trouble began the first weekend. A convoy from the 368th went to Bisbee. A restaurant owner told a soldier, "We don't serve niggers." The soldier knocked him out and his pals trashed the place. In the ensuing melee a black soldier was shot by the cops. The soldiers tried to set the town on fire and retreated toward their trucks. The city cops and military police from the Eighth Air Force surrounded them. The soldiers were savagely beaten and some received long prison sentences. The generals declared Bisbee off-limits. The merchants lost a million dollars in trade and the soldiers lost a place to relax. The convoys were

still going to Tucson and Nogales. Our little group in the platoon decided it was better to go to Mexico, even though it was farther away.

*

The convoy bounced over the dusty secondary roads for three hours before it reached the border. Without stopping at any of the bars in the newer section of town, the convoy drove straight to "Ranchita," the old walled city. Ranchita had always been the hangout for black soldiers. White soldiers from the Eighth Air Force went to the newer section of town. No one challenged the segregation and it became entrenched.

Ranchita was wall-to-wall prostitution, gambling, and games. Brad, Bunk, Lee, and I went from bar to bar drinking Modelo and Dos Equis. We played soccer with the kids, who were all over the place. Wearing huge mariachis, we had our pictures taken sitting on painted burros. As the afternoon darkened into evening we grew weary of Ranchita and decided to see the rest of the town.

Inside Ranchita, black MPs patrolled with the Mexican Policia. Outside the walls the Policia patrolled with white MPs. We stepped outside the walled area and started walking up one of the main streets. Before we had gone two blocks a patrol approached us. The white MP

pulled his club from its holster, Brad slid his right hand into his pocket, Bunk moved to the left, Lee to the right so the MP couldn't cover us all at once.

"Where you all boys goin'?"

We ignored the "boys" stuff.

"Lookin' around," Brad said, glaring at the MP.

"You all ought to stay in your own part and there won't be no trouble." The MP knew that he was the one in trouble.

I translated a sentence in my head, hating that I hadn't learned Spanish in school.

"Senor, quieremos ir alli. OK?" I said, waving my arm to the south and east.

El policia grinned and said, "All this is Mexico. You go where you want as long

as you obey Mexican law. No fighting and no bothering the girls."

"Thank you. We just want to look around."

He glanced at the MP and back to me. "I'm glad to see you are learning Spanish."

"I have Mexican friends. They tried to teach me." I knew that went over.

*

Buying trinkets and exchanging glares with the Eighth Air Force men, we wandered for an hour through the town. Tired and broke, we returned to Ranchita and the first convoy back to Huachuca. A group of soldiers were milling about near the convoy. The four of us went over to see what was happening.

Two soldiers from the 368th were standing in the middle of the crowd talking excitedly. They had been in a hell of a fight. Both were bloody. One of the soldiers had a nasty gash above his eye. He gazed at the crowd with a who-is-with-me? look in his eyes.

"We might have to take it in Mississippi, but we ain't got to take it in Mexico. I'm getting me a equalizer an goin' back there." He looked slowly over the crowd and said in a low, deliberate voice, each word standing separately, "I'm ready to die like a man before I'll live like their fuckin' dog. Who's goin' with me?"

I turned to one of the soldiers.

"What the hell happened?"

"Looks like they went into town and went to a bar to get a drink and a gang of white soldiers jumped 'em. The Mexican police got 'em out and brung'em here so the white MPs don't get

'em."

The soldier with the gash above his eye continued to look over the crowd, pausing to stare into each set of eyes until there was a nod of agreement or the mumbled "I'm in."

Thirty soldiers were ready to fight.

"Where we gonna get the iron?" a soldier asked.

"Ah'm ready to get it on. What's the plan?" another asked.

There was a moment of awkward silence. There were no guns, no plan, no leader, only a mission. Brad glanced at Lee and Bunk and then at me, securing our agreement that he should speak on our behalf.

"Look, men. You all been in this fight long enough to know that we got to have a plan. We got to get organized. Them crackers are waiting for you. They figure you're coming back.

They got their MPs ready and right now it's about twenty of them for each one of us. We ain't gonna get but one crack at it. What say we do it right?"

"He's right, men," the bloodied soldier said.

"How we gonna do it?" another asked.

"First thing, we got to break up this crowd before the MPs come or some handkerchief head gets wind of what we're doin'. Me an' my buddies here are from the 369th. A couple of guys

from the 368th and the 25th meet us over at the gate. We're infantry. There's eighteen thousand of us. We can take care of them sissy-ass air force crackers."

At the gate we agreed to think things over and meet up at the Long Bar on Monday after supper. There we could organize and work out some plan of action. We started back to the fort, full of exhilarating whispers and youthful bragging about how we were going to whip some ass next time. The laughter subsided and some of the men drifted off to sleep.

It was time for introspection. I knew that I was being drawn further down the road to rebellion, a road from which there is no turning aside and no return. If we were going to fight, it had to be offensive, not defensive. If these white soldiers got the slightest hint that we were afraid -. I thought back to the roots of those Ideas.

*

The night of New Year's Eve, 1934, was unusually warm for Wabasha. A light, powdery snow began to fall about eight o'clock when the party began. By ten, the light powder had covered the packed snow and ice already on the ground. It made walking slippery and slow going.

Pop's New Year's party was in full swing. Mr. and Mrs. Mason, the Riesters, the Stroots, and the Barens family were all there. I turned eleven that year. The grown-ups were spiking punch with illegal whiskey and telling jokes. I showed off my birthday gift to their kids.

Pop's railway mail clerk job was steady and we were better off than most of our neighbors. I had gotten an elegant gift. My new .22-caliber rifle was the finest gift any country boy could receive. Mom gave me a stern look. She didn't like guns and she didn't like whiskey. I could tell she was upset now that both of them were present. I put my gun away.

"Say, Laddie Buck." Pop always called me that when he was drinking. "Take this fifteen cents, go to the store, and tell Mamie to give you a pack of Chesterfields."

The store was just next door, but Mom told my older brother to go with me. It was late and New Year's Eve, with everybody drinking and carousing around. She was on edge.

We ran out of the door, across the yard, and into the store.

"Happy New Year, boys." Mamie was always good to us. Sometimes, if her husband wasn't watching, she would slip us a little piece of candy.

Then we saw Art. He lived on the other side of town but would come to Mamie's to get moonshine and beer. Two days before, as he staggered half-drunk down the street, our little gang had followed him yelling,

Gene, Gene made a machine

Joe, Joe made it go

Art, Art let a fart

And blew the Goddamn thing apart.

He chased us but we got away, pelting him with snowballs and chunks of ice. I knew he would remember me, my being the only colored kid in the gang.

I moved to run away. He quickly got between me and the door.

"Art," Mamie cautioned, "leave the kids alone."

"I'm of a mind to let you go." His face was near mine, swaying, stinking from cheap booze. "I might even give you a nickel if you dance a little jig for me."

"I don't dance for white trash." It came out without my thinking about it.

Wham! The stars and whirligigs filled my brain. Mamie's scream and my brother's yelling seemed so distant. I gave up trying to rise and sank into the warmth of the floor.

They told me that Pop first went for his pistol. The men at the party disarmed him. Then he went for the murderous bowie knife. They took that from him, too. Pop saw Art was getting away. I got to the doorway in time to see him run through the snow, slipping and cursing. He caught Art, spun him around, and hit him in the face. When the men pulled Pop away, he was fighting Missouri style, grinding the heel of his shoe onto Art's mouth and nose. The men got Pop back to the house and Art to the hospital.

The party didn't last much longer after that. At midnight everyone sang of auld lang syne.

Then they went home, apprehensive and frightened by the fight. Within an hour, Mr. Mason knocked on the door. He and Pop stood beside the stove talking in tense whispers. I heard Mr.

Mason say, "Don't be a fool, Ben. Just put the family in the car. I'll go with you to Winona."

"My kinsfolk will put you up."

"Bert," Pop said with soft resignation, "I'm the only colored man in this town. I can't run."

There's nowhere to stop."

They talked a little longer and Mr. Mason left. Pop got the .30-06 and loaded it, then the pump shotgun, then the .38. He was a little drunk and pushed Mom away when she tried to stop him.

The sheriff came to the house. He didn't even try to talk softly. "Ben, this is serious. There's a mob forming. They're talking about a lynching. I can take you up to Reeds Landing, or I can take the family to the jail, where I can protect them. I don't have the men to protect you here."

"Luke, I appreciate what you're doing. If I can't handle this, I want you to take the kids to my sister in Minneapolis. No, Luke, I've got to do it my way. It's my right and it's my duty."

The sheriff shrugged. "I can't do nothing until somebody breaks the law. Don't take the law in your own hands."

The sheriff left. It was one o'clock and now I was wide awake.

Pop started to put on his coat. I crept back into the bedroom and put on mine, got my .22, and went out the back door to the car. I barely heard Pop giving his final answer to Mom.

"I'll come back with respect, or on my shield."

Pop had bought the big brand-new Packard sedan for ten dollars from Mr. Swenson after the bank foreclosed on his pickle factory. It wasn't just that he didn't want the bank to get the car; selling it to the only Negro family for ten bucks taught the bank a lesson. I snuck into the back and huddled on the floor by the time Pop put the guns in and started the car.

There were at least fifty or sixty men standing around the front of the tavern across the street from the Anderson Hotel. They knew Pop's car and they stood silently, facing him as he pulled to the opposite curb and got out on the passenger side. First he laid the shotgun, then the .30-06 across the hood. He stepped under the street light and pulled his belt a notch tighter so they could see the .38. There was a moment of dramatic silence that Pop really enjoyed.

"I hear you sons of bitches are looking for me." The silence deepened. Finally

one of them said, "Well, I don't think anybody is going to respect a man who doesn't protect his family.

Come on and have a drink. Let's forget it."

He was gone an hour and I didn't wake up until he opened the door. When he saw me with my rifle, he chuckled, "Gonna help the old man out, Laddie Buck?"

I mumbled a sleepy yes.

Half drunk but serious, he shook me gently. When I awoke he said, "Don't let those white cock whollopers grind you down or scare you. They coming for you? Go meet 'em. They got more to live for than you. They'll back down."

*

The plan was forming in my mind. I felt more at ease and slept as the big six-by-six truck growled to the top of Montezuma Pass and began the twenty-mile decline to the fort.

* * *

It was a bigger effort than we had bargained for. Planning and carrying out a secret operation involving some seventy-five soldiers from three different regiments taxed our ability to the breaking point. We spent the first meeting dividing ourselves into three regimental committees and then talked about what we were going to do. Only at the end of the meeting did Brad raise the issue of how we were going to get it done. After working out a plan, it took three more weeks to get it underway. That didn't hurt us. The Eighth Air Force men and the MPs lowered their guard each day that passed without our retaliating.

By working in the Operations Department of the battalion I picked up the fundamentals of organization and was soon in charge of that part of the job. We set up a communications system based on the battalion message centers. That way we had access to a jeep and a radio if we needed them. Each regimental committee was responsible for its own security. We agreed that no rifles would be taken. We would have to rely on the friendliness of the Policia and the Mexican people.

The plan was a simple one. We would get twenty-five men from each regiment.

After arriving at Ranchita, we would fan out in groups of five. Each regimental committee would have a leader. The leader of each five-man committee was responsible for keeping the men together during the fight and seeing that they got back to the safety of the walled area.

Three men would go into El Tecolote bar and order drinks. We could count on the whites to start something. The three men would gang whoever started the fight, knock him out, and hurt him. Then the three would fight their way to the door. A five-man squad would be outside the door ready to go in if they trapped our men. We didn't want to damage the bar.

We would need the goodwill of the Mexicans inside. The remainder of our little army, scattered in the alleyways, would join the fighting outside. In Mexico we had nothing to fear from the disarmed MPs.

Lee, Brad, Bunk, Hewitt, and I made up our squad. Hewitt was not one to get into a street fight. He was only five foot five, and his slender body was more accustomed to sitting at a desk than gutter fighting. We told him it wasn't necessary for him to go. Hurt that we might not want him along, he looked at each of us for a moment.

"I don't think a lynch mob will wait to find out that I'm a West Indian student at Columbia."

Punching him on the arm and warning him not to start arguing with the pecks, we welcomed him in. As soon as I could, I pulled Brad aside and told him that the two of us would have to be responsible.

At the end of the third week, we briefed the squad leaders and were ready to take on the Eighth Air Force.

*

Nogales was so peaceful, so unaware of what we planned. The convoy was a little larger than usual and took a little longer to make its way down the asphalt road through the new section of town. As we passed El Tecolote bar we glanced over the area and, satisfied with our

strategy, sat back and relaxed. The convoy swung onto the rough-rutted dirt road that led into Ranchita.

The operation was going so smoothly it frightened us. A quick meeting with the regimental leaders was reassuring. As the night darkened we knew that the air force men were already on the way to getting drunk. They would be less alert, less able to fight, and would be getting on the nerves of the Mexican patrons at the bar.

Group by group the squads slipped through the gate and fanned out toward the bar. The men from the 25th and the 368th left and the five squads from our regiment began sauntering through the gate. We were to bring up the rear. Brad signaled to Hewitt, who nodded to Lee and Bunk. With hearts hammering we left Ranchita and headed for the bar. There was no turning back, and sending someone ahead to scout the area was impossible. Everything now depended upon luck and discipline.

Outside the gate, the two men from the 368th who had been beaten up joined us.

"We goin' in. We got some gettin' even to do."

"Only reason we didn't want you all to go in first is that they might recognize you. We got to have surprise."

"I know. We'll keep our heads down. It ain't right that we don't get the first lick in."

It was too late to argue or to change plans. Brad was in charge. His decision came in tense whispers. Brad, the men from the 368th, and I would enter the bar. He explained to them the necessity of staying close together and getting out as soon as possible. They agreed and we crossed the street into the final block to the bar. Black soldiers hid beneath the trees and in the alleyways. The whites would approach the bar from the other direction, and it was unlikely that they had any idea what was in store.

Parker stepped out of the darkness, rolling his cud of tobacco farther to the side of his mouth and packing it against the molars. The steel-rimmed glasses pressed against his face as he glared at the bar and said to Brad with matter-of-fact finality, 'Ah'm goin' in with you.'

There was no arguing with him - the plan changed again. "What ya got in your hand? We can't use a knife or gun in there."

Parker opened his fist to reveal a six-inch piece of broomstick.

"It ain't illegal - make your fist hard. Or you can push it out a little an' swing overhand. Bust a motherfucka's head if they's crowdin' you."

Brad glanced at me as if to say, "If we don't hurry the whole thing is going to fall apart."

"OK. Don't want more than four in there it'll alert 'em. Nels, you take charge out here. Let's go."

*

Brad stepped around the corner and into the bar followed by the 368th men, with Parker's huge hulking frame bringing up the rear.

A block away a group of air force men passed under the dull street light and came slowly toward us. Our position suddenly became precarious. Caught between two groups, we would lose the advantage of superior numbers.

"What's happening, Hew?"

"They're talking to the bartender. The white guys are looking at them, but nothing is happening ... they're drinking a beer ... four white guys are coming over ... they're talking. He pushed Brad ... the 368th guys are beating the shit out of him. .."

The approaching airmen were fewer than fifty yards away. They saw us and slowed their pace. After a moment's hesitation, three of them began walking toward the bar.

The shouts and scuffling inside grew louder. I ran to the window. Fewer than half the white soldiers were trying to get into the fight. Most had backed away, but twenty of them were attempting to surround Brad. The soldiers approaching us were very close and we would have to meet them. I signaled to the nearest squad. They ran from the alleyway to the entrance to the bar.

"Bunk, you guys take care of the door - Lee and me'll go see if' these guys want to talk."

They saw that a gang fight was underway. The soldiers stopped to look. Brad and one of the 368th men were backing out of the bar. They held one airman between them, banging his head against the wall and punching him in the face.

"What's going on in there?" one of the air force men asked me.

"A fight." I tried not to sound belligerent.

"Bout what? Who's fighting?"

"Looks like some of you guys don't want us to go in that bar. We goin' in."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ, what do you mean, `you guys'? I don't care who goes anywhere... "

The fighting was spilling into the street. We had to get back. I turned to the airman. "If you all ain't in it, stay up here. Stay out of it."

Lee and I had to run to get past the airmen who were now spilling into the street. The men from the Ninety-third were doing it according to plan. As those who were fighting retreated past them toward Ranchita, the squads would run from their hiding places and, from a flanking position, jump into the fight. What at first had appeared to be an uneven fight between four black and thirty white soldiers became fifteen against thirty, then thirty against thirty, forty-five against thirty, sixty-five against thirty. Those who called us "nigger" were beaten unmercifully. Aside from that, the fight was mostly shoving and hitting in the chest or arms. They were half drunk, confused, and outnumbered. Some were fighting as white against black, some as air force against army, and we were having fun getting even.

A jeep with a load of white MPs screeched to a halt. The MPs jumped out, flailing their clubs against the black soldiers. They caught a few by surprise and knocked them to the ground.

Suddenly the edge of playfulness was gone and we were fighting for our lives. The men began to team up against the MPs.

I more sensed than saw that Hewitt was in trouble. An airman had him in a choke hold while an MP rammed his club into Hewitt's ribs. There was a frightful scream of pain and a rattling gasp for breath. I shoved the airman away

from me and leaped on the back of the MP, grabbed his club, and tried to wrestle him to the ground. The man holding Hewitt hit me hard in the face, sending whirligigs and stars spinning through my brain. I fell off the MP's back, rolled over, and as I was getting to my feet, took a kick in the chest. Now I was fighting on infantry training, and that training, almost an instinct, was to kill. The MP raised his club to hit Hewitt in the face. I got my hands on his wrist as he gouged at my eyes. Suddenly he stiffened and went limp. His eyes widened and his open mouth gasped for air as he fell, blood spurting from a punctured kidney. I kicked at his groin and turned to meet the expected blow from the man holding Hewitt. Then I saw Brad, lips pulled back from his teeth, snarling at the MP in naked hatred.

"That's for the boys in Bisbee, Goddamn you to hell!"

We both jumped at the airman beating Hew. Brad jerked the man's head backward and hit him in the throat. Lips parted, teeth clinched, he was growling over and over,

"Turn him loose, you motherfucker turn him loose."

I saw the blood on his hand and saw where it had stained my pants leg.

"You hurt, man?"

"No, I'm all right. We gotta get out of here."

I glanced at the MP writhing on the ground, holding his side to stanch the blood and unable to cry for help. For a moment my mind flashed back to the Seattle freight yard and I saw Red Anderson lying in his blood. I fought back the urge to kick him in the face and nuts before we left. A tug from Brad and I turned to help him hold Hewitt between us as we made our way through the swirling, cursing, fighting soldiers.

The policia had arrived, and so had two more jeeploads of MPs. Four of the Mexican police officers stood beside the cars holding rifles while the others using clubs separated the fighters.

Through some magic communication we learned in the slave pens and the prisons, the Ninety-third men as if on command began to scatter and disappear into the night, making their way back to Ranchita. I looked around. None of our

men was on the ground and none captured. No one seemed too interested in following us into the night.

Hew's bruised rib cage gave him trouble breathing as we dogtrotted into the old section of town and to safety behind the walls of Ranchita. I had a big, tender lump below my temple, but otherwise I felt fine. At the public spigot Brad washed his hands and I scrubbed the blood from my pants leg.

As the last of the men came through the gate, we went to meet with the regimental leaders.

With all the men accounted for, a carnival spirit evolved as they described their individual fights.

Lee was holding court: "You all see me lay that cracker down?"

"You laid him on the killin' floor, man."

Lee, barely five foot seven, was shuffling through the dust as if he were in the ring, landing jabs and uppercuts on his imaginary opponent.

"I didn't get mad till he calls me a ugly fuckin' nigger. Nobody calls me ugly. I laid a left jab to the guts an' brought a overhand right from the floor."

Lee leaned back as if he were a pitcher, bringing his fist from the ground, over his shoulder.

"I tagged him smack on the chin. He staggered. I tagged him again " Lee grunted with the effort, "and he fell like shit from a tall bull. PO-LA-AP" Lee threw out his arms and flopped on his back in the dust. The howls of Southern laughter echoed through Kanchita. The next man took center stage, but an undercurrent of apprehension ran through the laughing and joking. We all knew that a gang of black troops couldn't whip a gang of white troops and get off scot-free.

A white lieutenant colonel from the Ninety-third drove his jeep into the center of the compound. Grabbing every noncom he saw, he ordered them to round up the men so he could talk to them.

The noncoms spread out into the bars and whorehouses, rounding up the soldiers. As we assembled, the lieutenant colonel mounted his jeep and informed

us that a riot had taken place. Nogales was now off-limits for the Ninety-third. We mounted into the trucks while the

Eighth Air Force MPs tried to identify some of the fighters. The trucks formed a convoy and pulled out of Nogales for the long ride back to the fort.

As the convoy gathered speed a soldier began to sing and the rest of the men joined in.

Sister mary, don't you weep, don't you moan

Sister mary, don't you weep, don't you moan

Old Pharoah's army got drowned-ed

Oh Mary, don't you weep

Some rough laughter, and the song died out as the uncorked tequila bottles passed down the row of troops.

"Wonder what they gonna do with us now," Bunk mumbled, after shaking the tequila fumes from his mouth and nose.

"Bisbee off limits, Nogales off limits - don't dare go to Phoenix."

"They can't keep us bottled up in Huachuca. That place is going to explode," Hewitt added between painful gasps for breath.

The following week a division directive alerted us to move out to the maneuver area of Louisiana.

* * *

[....]

[Confusion and indecision continued among the government and Army top brass. Clashes between black soldiers and white civilians and soldiers occurred regularly in the southern states. The military commanders from southern states often refused to accept black soldiers as combatants and would only tolerate them as service personnel. Peery's 93rd Division, after being kept in the US -

based in various remote camps while the Army decided what to do with them - were eventually sent on active service in the South Pacific. The segregation and racial tensions continued - Peery describes one incident below.]

THE WAR GROUND ON. Each new island looked like the last. The white soldiers went back to New Zealand or Australia for short periods of rest and recuperation. These countries would not accept Negro troops on their soil. There was no rest for the Ninety-third.

Unloading boats and clearing the jungle constituted our rest periods.

Green Island and Manus lay behind us. Our "rest period" - securing the island of Emiru -

ended, and we boarded an attack transport for the three-day journey to Morotai.

The rumor was out that we would relieve the Thirty-first "Dixie" Division, complete the mopping up operations, and stage for the invasion of Japan. Aboard ship, the few Negro sailors added more rumors to the heap.

"The Thirty-first is the Goddamndest set of Ku Kluxers ever seen."

"I honest to Jesus, they know you all are coming and they aim to fight it out."

"They been beatin' hell out of a Negro water supply company there."

"A field hospital just moved onto the island. The Thirty-first said they gonna lynch any nigger look cross-eyed at the women."

I didn't put much stock in rumors, but I oiled, loaded, and locked my rifle.

The third day at sea, the lush green island of Morotai rose out of the mist. Skirting the huge island of Halmahera, we landed at the southern tip of Morotai.

"Sure enough, a hospital was there. Two groups of soldiers and a few nurses stood watching as our landing craft nosed ashore and lowered the ramp. A group of dishevelled white infantrymen stood to one side. Some carried rifles. On the other side stood the most forlorn group of Negro soldiers I had ever seen. A group of nurses stood back near one of the tents.

The ramp settled on the sand and I stepped out to assemble the platoon. Two of the Negro soldiers walked over to me. One grabbed my hand and then hugged me.

"Jesus Christ! I'm glad to see a black man with a rifle."

"What's the matter, man?"

"We been catchin' hell here. These white motherfuckers' got all the guns - they're the military police and they been beating us up."

So the rumor was true. So they want to lynch somebody. I turned to the men filing out of the landing craft.

"Looks like the Dixie boys been giving these men a hard time."

Our men, on edge from rumors, stepped quickly onto the beach, rifles in hand, keeping an eye on the white soldiers. Parker screwed up his black face and spit a huge cud of tobacco onto the sand.

"Mothafuck them motherfuckers! Let 'em say something to me!" Parker's snarl carried over the area. "Parker!" Captain Forrest yelled, "Shut yo're Goddamn mouth!" I Parker glared at Forrest, released the safety catch on his rifle, and stepped onto the beach.

The nurses, standing near the white soldiers, turned to one another. The white soldiers shifted about restlessly. On deck and on the ramp a few more soldiers released the safety catches. A few more soft clicks and then at once, every one released the catches.

I stepped quickly up the beach toward the Negro soldiers, my heart in my throat. This was worse than combat. We greatly outnumbered them, but we were bunched together for a slaughter. The officers on deck talked together nervously. Behind them, the sailors glanced around for cover. The white soldiers shifted their weapons. We were more than they had bargained for. I turned my back on them and called to the section, "OK, men, fall in here."

They moved cautiously across the sand and formed ranks. The landing craft carrying Company C nudged ashore and the men began to disembark. A white soldier started towards us, unbuckling the holster of his .45. The men stood

quietly, their rifles at the ready. The white soldier stopped twenty feet before the landing craft.

"Who's doin' that Goddamn cussin'?"

His hand slid toward the pistol.

'Ah'm tellin' you fuckin' niggers . . . "

The clack of bolts shoving bullets into the firing chambers drowned him out. Five rifles snapped to shoulders aimed at the half-drunk white man. The nurses screamed and ran for the hospital tents. The white soldiers scattered for cover. Men from Company C ran from the landing craft. The unarmed black soldiers from the water filtration company fell over one another getting out of the line of fire. Captain Williams, the Negro commander of Company C, ran between the groups. Pulling his .45 from its holster, he shouted for attention. Our men lowered their rifles and snapped to. The terrified white soldier did not move.

"All right, soldier. That means you, too."

The soldier came to a sloppy attention.

"You get the hell to your own area. That's a direct order!"

The soldier staggered back to his group. Colonel Meyers walked toward Captain Williams.

An exchange of salutes and Captain Williams went back to his company. Two jeeploads of white MPs drove onto the beach. Meyers went to talk with them. We knew what was happening. Meyers, a gutless white supremacist from Oklahoma, wasn't going to look bad before these Southern whites. He wasn't going to let anyone mistreat "his" Negroes. The MPs and the white soldiers left and we marched to the edge of the swamp that the commander of the Thirty-first had designated our bivouac area.

Tension rose immediately between the white MPs and our soldiers. Arrests and fights between them occurred almost daily. Just as the tension reached the flash point, our division headquarters moved to the island. General Johnson, our new commanding officer and the senior officer on the island, took command. Our military police replaced those of the Dixie Division and the bottom rail went to

the top. A few cracked heads and the Dixie boys accepted the black MPs. Before any serious trouble developed, the Thirty-first left for the invasion of the Philippines.

===== * * * =====